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# Jan Patočka, "The Selected Writings of Jan Patočka: Care for the Soul" Ivan Chvatík and Erin Plunkett (Eds.). Trans. by Alex Zucker

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**Jan Patočka.** *The Selected Writings of Jan Patočka: Care for the Soul.* Ivan Chvatík and Erin Plunkett (Eds.). Trans. by Alex Zucker. Bloomsbury Academic 2022. 392 pp. \$100 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781350139107); \$34.45 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781350139091).

Jan Patočka's thought provides an interesting synthesis of the philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. A student of both, Patočka went on to become a titan of phenomenology in his own right and a significant and influential philosopher of European thought and culture. However, due to his historical situation, much of his writing has remained untranslated and inaccessible to the larger philosophical community. In *The Selected Writings of Jan Patočka: Care for the Soul*, English readers are not only treated to some of Patočka's philosophical writings on phenomenology but also his views on art, culture, and the philosophy of history thereby making this text a must-read for any scholars of 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy, phenomenology, and European thought and development.

Patočka was first and foremost a teacher in the line of Socrates, where being able to fully engage with a question's problematicity is considered more important than any of its various potential answers. Answers remain important but individually only represent a single destination or result of that questioning inquiry. What remains often overlooked in philosophy according to Patočka, is the vibrant possibility of further thought that the activity of questioning elicits. This is not to say that answers are devalued, just tempered to preserve the original questions from whence they spring. The preservation of a question is to keep it from being eclipsed by the powerful and excellent answers that can be derived from asking it. A core value of phenomenology, this respect for problematicity is a beautiful synthesis of Husserl's motto for phenomenology '*zu den Sachen selbst*' (translated as 'to the things themselves') and Heidegger's value for the practice of questioning.

The text itself is divided into five parts, each of which covers a particular contribution to philosophy. Part one, entitled 'Early Texts,' introduces the reader to some main ideas of Patočka's approach to philosophy, history, and education. In particular is the notion of the spiritual and its important and often overlooked role in society. According to Chvatík and Plunkett, 'here, spiritual does not denote anything religious but instead marks out that element of human being which is capable of more than mere survival, which would be the subject and the agent of both "history" and "education" as Patočka presents them' (25). One of the central concerns of Patočka's thought is not only the phenomenology of the soul but also the proper cultivation and care for the soul. These two tasks are the aim of a responsible philosophy and comprise essential parts in an excellent educational system. As the editors put it quite well 'education, [Patočka] argues, cannot mean simply cramming the head with facts, nor should it be an intellectual exercise; it must train learners to develop a new relationship to themselves and to relate to the world differently, responsibly' (25). This philosophy of responsibility is a major through-line of Patočka's work and thought.

Part two, entitled 'Care for the Soul,' presents three texts that give a good overview of how Patočka retrieves the idea of care for the soul from ancient Greek philosophy, namely in the Socratic form of a radical self-questioning. The soul comprises the human activity or movement towards a life lived in truth, both in a pursuit of truth through the activity of questioning and in the contemplation of various true answers. For Patočka, 'care for the soul is a commitment to and



orientation toward a deeper source of value than those on offer in any given social framework. [Thus,] care for the soul is always, at the same time, care for the *polis* or the city – the space of life in common. In this sense, it is always “political” (52). Therefore, it is not enough to simply question after or contemplate truth for Patočka, but in addition to ‘having’ and ‘knowing’ truth, one must also try to live a life of truth in the world with others.

Part three, entitled ‘Phenomenology,’ presents two texts on how Patočka’s interprets and develops phenomenology from his teachers Husserl and Heidegger. For Patočka, phenomenology takes shape as *philosophical heresy* here understood as maintaining a thinker’s questions while at the same time proposing contrary answers. As the central questions of phenomenology are preserved, this enables one to view phenomenology as more than just a list of dogmatic concepts, descriptions, and systems. For Patočka, this develops phenomenology into a collection of *living questions* which remain worth asking and answering even in light of the excellent answers already provided by the traditions of Husserl, Heidegger and many other excellent phenomenologists. Importantly for Patočka, this reveals the centrality of the activity of questioning for phenomenology and philosophy in general.

Part four, entitled ‘Arts and Culture,’ presents eight texts that engage with literary texts and cultural issues. Patočka’s ‘novel insights on language, temporality, fantasy, and world-disclosure within literary writings affirm the philosophical value of literary texts, especially in a social context that is dominated by instrumental reason and by the increasing specialization of knowledge’ (163). These texts reveal Patočka’s follow-through on how a pursuit of truth and a life lived in truth is possible beyond the technical and purely intellectual scope of philosophy *per se*, but can include other human endeavors such as creativity, artistic expression, and faith. By showing how these non-philosophical projects are worthy of philosophical reflection, Patočka broadens and enriches the notion of truth beyond a strictly conceptual, indexical, or propositional understanding. This is to restore to the idea of truth, the human spiritual dimension that is in danger of being eclipsed by the success of science in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Part five, entitled ‘Philosophy of History,’ presents four texts that further explore the role of the spiritual in the larger context of European identity and the challenges of an instrumental view of nature brought on by a technological and scientific paradigm. In this view, the value of human spirituality is in danger of being eclipsed by nihilism, technology, and systematicity. To combat this, Patočka calls on the original source of philosophy (and Europe): problemat�city. Patočka states that ‘essentially, all of philosophy is nothing other than the development of this problemat�city as great thinkers have expressed and grasped it’ (299). To participate in problemat�city is to engage in radical questioning. Patočka states that ‘Socrates and Plato were problematizers of life, people who did not accept reality as it is given, but rather saw it as shaken—but the conclusion they drew from this was that some kind of peculiar, *other life is possible*; another direction of life, something like a *new ground*, and only here is it possible to gauge what is and what is not’ (301). Thus, in response to the threat of the over-systematicity of existence (and within it, human existence), is a renewal of shaken meaning or *thaumasein*: to restore the wonder of nature, human nature, and the role humanity is to play in the scientific project to understand nature. Shaken meaning is not a rejection of tradition,

meaning, or truth but the recognition that like answers, all of these things have come from the flux of questioning. By restoring and preserving the problematicity of existence, the original and radical questioning that has brought us to where we find ourselves today, is likewise protected from being eclipsed by the truth it also elicits. This is what phenomenology means for Patočka.

At the end of the text, there is a beautiful postscript by Luděk Sekyra, Founder of the Sekyra Foundation, that gives a short philosophical biography of Patočka's life. Therein he states that 'Socrates' thesis that "the unexamined life is not worth living" could serve as the motto for Patočka's thinking at the tail end of his philosophical journey. Life in Patočka's view is inextricably bound up with problematization, upheaval, and the resultant "solidarity of the shaken" (324). Patočka's phenomenology can be understood as a kind of questioning philosophy that specifically follows the path carved out by Heidegger and keeps the thought and work of Husserl in a state of preserved hindsight. The philosophical preservation of wonder elicited by a question is woven into the very practice of phenomenology for Patočka; namely in always returning to raise a question for oneself. In so doing, one is able to strive for an extreme level of responsibility, one definitely worthy of Socrates himself. This rich text provides an excellent insight into Patočka's work and thought and is a must-read for anyone working in phenomenology and contemporary philosophy, be they student or scholar.

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